

VZCZCXRO9533  
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHHI #0499/01 1200724  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 290724Z APR 08 ZDK  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7726  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4657  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0051  
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000499

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: Thai Ha Church Land Ownership Dispute Continues

REFS: A. Hanoi 0160 B. Hanoi 0446 C. Hanoi 0278

HANOI 00000499 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Despite numerous calls from Hanoi authorities to cease, Catholic believers continue to gather at a site adjacent to Hanoi's Thai Ha Catholic parish church, in a dispute with the Government of Vietnam (GVN), now in its fourth month (Refs A, B). While the numbers of congregants gathering at the site has lessened for the time being, the dispute is far from resolved and local Hanoi officials appear to be at a loss on next steps. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) In an ongoing dispute with local government officials, Hanoi Thai Ha parish congregants are seeking the return of property currently controlled by the GVN and have been gathering at the disputed site, off and on, since January 2008 (Refs. A and B). In an April 23 meeting with Poloff, Father Nguyen Van Khai, one of the senior priests at Thai Ha parish, clarified that the impetus for the recent gatherings at the site was a negative media campaign by the local state-controlled press. Press reports criticized Catholic believers for their efforts, accused them of making the situation increasingly tense, and called for them to obey an order from local authorities to stop gathering and clean up the site before noon on April 7. Local newspapers also reported that the crowd of Catholic believers was prepared to confront law enforcement. The reports stated that law enforcement officials did not rise to the challenge, implying that the Catholic congregants were seeking a violent confrontation, according to Father Khai.

¶3. (SBU) Instead of discouraging the gatherings, Father Khai explained that the media campaign actually had the opposite affect. While only small groups of congregants have been gathering at the site at 6 am and 7:30 pm to attend 15 minute praying sessions everyday over the last few months, several hundred Catholic believers began showing up at the disputed site following the offensive press reports. According to Father Khai, approximately 1,000 people who attend each Mass on Saturday and Sunday (one each morning and one each evening) now gather at the site for 15 minutes of prayer following the service.

¶4. (SBU) On April 11, the municipal People's Committee of Hanoi summoned the parish leadership to discuss the ongoing dispute at the offices of the Hanoi Department for Natural Resources and Environment. Local officials accused parish priests and parishioners of violating current laws and regulations related to traffic, construction, and public order by illegally gathering at the disputed site, causing noise, blocking traffic, illegally installing two tents on public property, and destroying public property by dismantling a wall intended to separate the disputed land from a street. According to Father Khai, he and a group of Thai Ha parish priests disputed each allegation, noting that the prayer gatherings are twice a day for 15 minutes, those gathered stay on the public sidewalk and are quiet and respectful, and the tents are temporary and while they may be a violation of law, so is construction of a wall and continued GVN control of the land.

15. (SBU) Regarding the land dispute, local officials stated that they had completed their investigation into the matter and determined that there is no legal foundation behind the Church's claim to the land. The Thai Ha parish leadership, in turn, presented documents to prove their ownership over the disputed land and pointed out that the GVN never issued any formal decision to confiscate the land (as required by law), nor had the Church ever formally sold or returned the land to the GVN. In response, local officials offered to turn part of disputed land into a public garden and another part, currently housing a temporary chapel, into a community center. Doubting that the local officials would keep their word, Father Khai and the rest of the group refused the offer and restated the parish's legal claim to the land. Father Khai noted that although the local official stated their decision was final, "we've heard that before."

16. (SBU) Father Khai noted that four police cars were present when the group arrived for the April 11 meeting and that police, both uniformed and plain-clothed, maintain an ongoing presence at the disputed site. He confirmed that there has been no violence between police and those gathered, but noted that the police frequently film the gatherings and take pictures.

17. (SBU) Father Khai highlighted that many local officials have visited the site, attempting to persuade Church officials to ask people to stop gathering at the site, including representatives from the neighborhood and city level administrations, the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the Vietnam Women's Union, and the People's Committee. However, given that a number of Catholic bishops have announced their public support of Thai Ha Church's efforts, the Thai Ha leadership and those gathered have no intention of giving in to the pressure. Father Khai asserted that Catholic believers will not be shaken in their confidence that they would win this battle, claiming that Catholic believers are becoming more and more

HANOI 00000499 002.2 OF 002

determined to continue the fight. He believes local officials are now at a loss for what to do about the ongoing gatherings - they have tried all means at their disposal, yet the Catholic believers continue to gather and insist on the return of the land.

18. (SBU) Comment: Although resolving the dispute over the site at Thai Ha parish is not a stated priority for the Catholic Church leadership in Vietnam, the disagreement with Hanoi authorities seems to have touched a nerve with local Catholics, who refuse to be cowed by threats or persuaded by cajoling, and has left the Hanoi People's Committee with few remaining options. All efforts by local authorities at intimidation and persuasion appear to have the opposite affect on the parishioners, hardening their resolve and increasing calls for a return of the land to the church. The Hanoi People's Committee must now decide whether to continue its efforts to seek a resolution or allow the construction of a planned factory to begin at the site. The latter will likely require the detention and possible arrest of Catholic parishioners, and almost certainly result in public outrage of the wider Catholic community, both in Vietnam and elsewhere. Whether the national government will become involved should the local authorities attempt to pursue the latter course of action, as the GVN did in the dispute over the former Vatican residence (Ref. C), remains to be seen. End comment.